

Changing Lives – Written Evidence (LBC0129)

1 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1 Changing Lives is a national charity, helping over 14,000 people change their lives for the better each year. We welcome this inquiry into life beyond Covid-19.
- 1.2 Our greatest concern is that we will emerge from this pandemic to a society more unequal than it was before. This threatens to exacerbate poverty, destitution and social isolation for many of the people we support, and places them at increased risk of exploitation and abuse.
- 1.3 Despite the challenges ahead, we are hopeful that with the sustained commitment of government, public services and the voluntary sector, there is an opportunity for radical change for the better. We would like to see a society that tackles multiple disadvantage at its root causes, and alleviates the adverse impacts of multiple disadvantage by addressing the structural and systemic barriers that may prevent people from moving towards a flourishing life.
- 1.4 To achieve this, we need to resist a return to the 'status quo' for supporting people and the removal of systemic barriers to innovation, learning from our experiences of the pandemic. We also need to see local leadership, continued political will, and long-term funding for public services.

2 ABOUT CHANGING LIVES

- 2.1 Changing Lives welcomes this inquiry into life beyond Covid-19, as part of the Committee's work to understand the long-term implications of the pandemic for our economy and our society.
- 2.2 Changing Lives is a national charity, helping over 14,000 people change their lives for the better each year. We have around 100 projects across the North and the Midlands, supporting people in their most challenging of circumstances, including homelessness, addictions, sexual exploitation, domestic abuse, contact with the criminal justice system, long-term unemployment and more.

3 LIFE BEYOND COVID

Our greatest concern – growing inequality, poverty and social isolation

- 3.1 Our greatest concern is that we will emerge from this pandemic to a society more unequal than it was before. This threatens to exacerbate poverty, destitution and social isolation for many of the people we support, and places them at increased risk of exploitation and abuse.
- 3.2 For example, we are already seeing more women selling sex on street, including those who are becoming involved in 'survival sex' for the first time – selling sex to meet their immediate needs, such as food or a place to sleep. We have also seen a significant increase in food poverty, as well as growing number of people experiencing mental health, safety and welfare issues, and financial difficulties.
- 3.3 There are also concerns that the crisis is causing more people to fall into need, with over a quarter of our projects indicating that they have seen an increase in new presentations (people that have not sought support previously).¹ As the longer-term economic impact of Covid-19 takes effect, we might expect this to increase still further.

3.4 Further, the digital divide across our society means that social isolation is acute for many of the people we work with. Connection and belonging is so important to all of us, but never more those for who social relationships may have been troubled by past experiences of rejection and trauma. Unless digital exclusion is properly recognised and addressed, we are concerned that we will see an increase in loneliness, social exclusion, and the people we support further excluded from the labour market.

Our greatest hope – radical change for the better

3.5 Despite the challenges ahead, we are hopeful that with the sustained commitment of government, public services and the voluntary sector, there is an opportunity for radical change for the better. We would like to see a society that tackles multiple disadvantage at its root causes, and alleviates the adverse impacts of multiple disadvantage by addressing the structural and systemic barriers that may prevent people from moving towards a flourishing life.

3.6 Looking ahead to life beyond Covid-19, we would like to see the following features emerge:

1) Greater empathy and understanding towards people experiencing multiple disadvantage

The people we support have often experienced significant trauma, yet are often described as 'complex', 'challenging' or 'difficult'. Our guiding principle is that we need to begin with what has happened to people in their own lives, taking seriously their narratives and recognising that they are experts in their own circumstances. Too often, though, we see that people are failed by a system that focuses on the problem rather than the person.

We sense that the pandemic has engendered a new public understanding of multiple disadvantage, indicating a more empathetic attitude to people we support. There has been recognition that the people we work with can be trusted, have huge amounts of positive internal resources, and have the capacity to lead their own way out of their situations with the right support.

2) A lasting sense of shared purpose and commitment to supporting people

Our view is that the most significant shift in how public services have supported people during Covid-19 is that we have been united by a common aim to do what is necessary to fight the virus and protect the NHS, rather than defaulting to contractual terms and performance metrics. We have experienced improved trust, collaboration and power sharing between those commissioning and delivering public services, based on a shared sense of purpose and focus on outcomes for people.

Moving forward, we hope this translates into a continued recognition of the importance of relationships, an understanding of trauma and listening to people's personal stories. We need to ensure that public services remain focused on wellbeing for people, and human-to-human relationships, rather than acting as 'gatekeepers' and 'managers of risk' which has often characterised the delivery of public services prior to Covid-19.

3) That digital exclusion has been recognised and properly addressed

At Changing Lives, like many others, we rapidly accelerated our use of technology to support people during the pandemic. For example, within our recovery services, we now offer virtual group therapy sessions, which has enabled us to continue

delivering our services, and actually increased engagement in some instances – have seen more people in full-time work, or with caring responsibilities, accessing our services.

However, we are also mindful that digital exclusion is significant. Many of the people we support do not have access to the necessary technology to engage with digital services, and even if they do, home may not be a safe place to access support – for example, people who are experiencing domestic abuse or exploitation. We hope that the learning from this pandemic leads to a more digitally inclusive society.

4) The voluntary sector viewed as equal partners in creating community-led solutions

Changing Lives and many of our partners in the voluntary sector have played a key role in supporting people through the pandemic, providing vital frontline services that have kept people safe in their communities and helped to relieve pressure on the NHS.

For the voluntary sector, from grassroots groups to larger organisations, our strength is in our connection with communities and our ability to adapt to rapidly emerging needs. These changes have enabled our teams to 'do the right thing' and support people as individuals, rather than having to subscribe to imposed targets and performance measures that are not always relevant. We would like to see continued recognition of the role of the voluntary sector in developing community-based responses to local need.

5) An increased focus on prevention

As a charity seeking to improve social justice, we advocate for prevention as a means of addressing the root causes of inequalities. It is our hope that the Covid-19 outbreak has created an opportunity to rethink not just how we support people in crisis, but how we can build the resilience of our communities to prevent a repeat of the stark impacts of the pandemic.

4 MAKING CHANGE HAPPEN

4.1 The pandemic presents a once in a lifetime opportunity reset our expectations as a society about how we address the root causes of multiple disadvantage, and support people experiencing multiple disadvantage to move towards a flourishing life. We believe the following elements are essential to help us achieve this:

1) Resisting a return to the status quo

During Covid-19, we have experienced a shift in power across public services, with all contributors being viewed as equal partners in creating responses to the pandemic. We are finding that already there is expectation that society will return to the 'status quo'. Statutory services are beginning to pull us back to 'what was' rather than looking to learn from and sustain positive examples of innovation. Our concern now is to ensure that public services can continue to support people for the long term, learning from our experiences of the pandemic and drawing on the best of the old and the new.

2) Continued political will at national level

The pandemic has highlighted the huge progress that can be made in addressing social injustices when there is enough political will. Among the most visible of these

commitments has been the Government's 'everyone in' policy, seeking to ensure that everyone who was rough sleeping at the time of the outbreak was provided with temporary accommodation. Already, however, we are starting to see people return to our streets and without a proactive response from government, we risk a winter where homelessness is a greater concern than ever. It is vital that civil society, politicians and others maintain pressure on decision-makers to ensure that progress is sustained.

3) Local leadership

Local autonomy has been the catalyst to the speed and person-centred approach of our response to the public health crisis, and that of other community-based public services. We have found that localised decision making and tailoring of support, has enabled us to work flexibly in order to meet people's needs rather than delivering 'to the letter'. The lessons we would take from this are the vital importance of working through organisations that are connected into their communities, and the need for public services to be organised in a way in which individuals feel a sense of their own autonomy and responsibility, so that they are able to respond when required.

4) Removal of systemic barriers to innovation

Covid-19 has provided public services with the opportunity to break outside of the mould, adapting our services to meet people's needs in ways that may not have been possible before. However, our perception is that individual public services are hugely capable of trialling and adapting new approaches, but are often hampered by legislation and policy. During Covid-19, we have been able to accommodate people who were previously rough sleeping because systems have been relaxed, allowing us to house people with no recourse to public funds (NFRP) or who do not have a local area connection, more so than because we adopted any particular 'new methods'. We would urge government to consider where systemic barriers to innovation can be removed.

5) Long-term funding for public services

We anticipate that people who have existing vulnerabilities may be at increased risk of harm as time goes on. For example, we are seeing more examples of women experiencing sexual violence, including a significant upturn in repeat victimisation. We are also seeing new people engaging in our accommodation services, and a further range of barriers to the people we support accessing good employment as the economy has receded. We would strongly recommend that arrangements are put in place to give public services the long-term funding they require to meet growing levels of need as a result of Covid-19, and to ensure that funding brought forward to meet increased demand during the pandemic does not lead to lower levels of funding at a later stage.

- 4.2 The pandemic has brought with it huge challenges for us all, and for none more so than people who have already experienced significant adversity and trauma in their lives. As a society, one of our biggest failures will be if we do not learn from this previously unimaginable experience to help change people's lives for the better. We urge the Committee to call on government to ensure that we do not waste the biggest opportunity we may ever to make a change.